

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The Michigan Women's Commission was established by PA 1 of 1968. Its mission is to improve the quality of life for Michigan women. The MWC consists of fifteen members of the public appointed by the Governor, who serve a three-year term, and ex officio representatives from the Departments of Civil Service, Education, Human Services and Labor & Economic Growth. There are also liaisons from all the other state departments who regularly attend MWC meetings about 4 times a year.

Statutory Powers and Duties (PA 1 of 1968)

- Study and review the status of women in Michigan
- Direct attention to critical issues that face women
- Recommend methods to overcome discrimination
- Promote methods for women to develop skills, continue their education and be retrained
- Make surveys and establish advisory committees on vital issues
- Recognize the accomplishments of women in Michigan

The Michigan Women's Commission, in partnership with other state agencies, has established initiatives to help raise awareness and prevent domestic violence.

In 1976 the Commission completed extensive research on domestic violence and held public hearings on the topic. The Commission then published "Domestic Assault: A Report on Family Violence in Michigan" based on its findings. This report proved to have a tremendous impact on policy in Michigan.

Until 1978, spouse abuse was considered a misdemeanor and an abuser would not be arrested unless police had a warrant or if they witnessed the abuse, which left many women hopeless and in danger. Since then, the state has recognized domestic violence as a serious crime, and expanded the law to cover both spouse and relationship abuse. Also important, stalking is recognized as a domestic violence offense.

In 1978, the Domestic Violence Prevention and Treatment Board was established within the Michigan Department of Human Services as a result of a growing awareness of domestic assault crimes. This board has 7 members appointed by the Governor and is responsible for:

- administering state and federal funding for domestic violence shelters and advocacy services,
- developing policy and policy recommendations, and
- providing technical assistance and training.

In 1995, the Michigan Legislature replaced domestic assault injunctions and restraining orders with Personal Protection Orders, or PPO's. The legislation expanded the definition of domestic violence and expanded the term to protect more victims from abuse. PPO's allow protection for those in marital and dating relationships and restrain offenders from interfering in domestic or work relationships of the petitioner, threatening the petitioner, and purchasing or possessing a firearm.

In 1999, the Domestic Violence Homicide Prevention Task Force evaluated domestic violence initiatives and resources. In 2001, the Michigan legislature enacted the recommendations of the task force.

In all, over 10 different bills were passed to protect domestic violence victims. Some examples of bills' content are:

- The term "dating relationship" and "dating violence" was added to the definition of domestic violence.
- Friend of the Court is required to provide training programs to staff and domestic relations mediators in the dynamics of domestic violence and handling domestic violence relations matters.
- Courts are permitted to seal court records to protect the safety of an alleged or potential victim of domestic violence.
- Local police agencies are now required to not only report domestic assault to the Michigan State Police, but also the number of domestic violence crimes and statistics of incidences of domestic violence.
- The Michigan State Police must produce a standard form to report domestic violence in order to better track domestic violence incidences throughout the state.
- Michigan can enforce out-of-state personal protection orders.
- Counties may establish a domestic violence death review team that can submit incidents and conclusions to the court.

The Michigan Women's Commission also offers a resource directory on-line that includes information regarding assistance, local shelters, and counseling services for all 83 counties. The Michigan Women's Commission also distributes brochures on the topics of stalking, rape, PPO's, dating violence and domestic violence. A domestic violence mirror cling and wallet card are also available, providing a phone number linking the caller to a domestic violence hotline.

The Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence reported in their 2002/2003 Annual Report, that in their 70 domestic and sexual violence programs provided emergency shelter services and/or crisis counseling to 30,873 survivors of domestic violence and/or sexual violence and responded to 78,222 hotline calls from individuals seeking support.

We obviously have more work to do. Since May 2003, the Michigan Women's Commission has been gathering information about the status of women in Michigan, surveying women about their priorities and holding public hearings.

In our 2004 hearings in Detroit, Lansing and Grand Rapids we learned there are still issues around domestic violence:

- domestic violence shelters need more funding
- bills that would require mandatory joint custody should be opposed
- the MWC needs to work together with the Michigan Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence and the MI Domestic Violence Prevention & Treatment Board
- increase funding for sexual assault programs, particularly the sexual assault nurse examiner (SANE) program
- child welfare issues involved in domestic violence situations need to be examined.

The Michigan Women's Commission has established a task force on domestic violence and will gather more information and make recommendations for action at a later date.

4/19/2005